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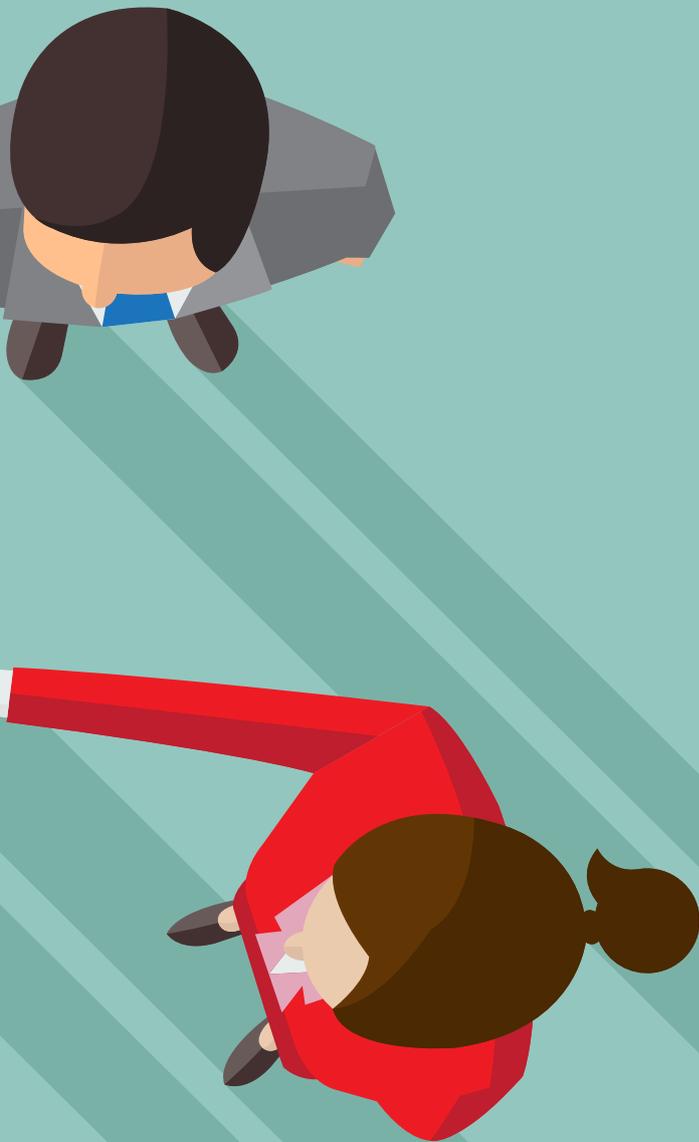
Men's positive roles sexual harassment

Overcoming barriers and taking action

Men have a vital role to play in contributing to the prevention and reduction of sexual harassment, in workplaces and elsewhere. Although men's involvement is often constrained by poor understanding of sexual harassment and barriers preventing their advocacy, there are effective ways to invite them in to the work of sexual harassment prevention, and practical actions men can take to make change.



in ending



Sexual harassment, family and domestic violence, and other forms of violence and abuse are now firmly on the public agenda. While most men do not perpetrate violence, these behaviours often are perpetrated by men, against women and other men. There are growing calls for men to join with women in supporting efforts to end harassment and violence.

This article explores men's positive roles in ending sexual harassment. It describes the barriers that men face, and the practical steps men can take to help prevent and reduce harassment, drawing on both sociological research on sexual harassment and insights from violence prevention education and advocacy.

A GENDER GAP IN ATTITUDES

There is a gender gap between men's and women's attitudes towards sexual harassment. Men typically have more limited definitions of harassment than women do, and perceive a narrower range of behaviours as harassment. They are more likely than women to see harassing behaviour as 'normal' or 'harmless' or 'fun', to tolerate unwanted sexual behaviour, to blame victims, and to fail to recognise harassment's impact on victims. Men also tend to have greater acceptance of some norms that support or tolerate or condone harassment. This means that men start behind women in terms of addressing the issue of harassment.¹

This gender gap in awareness of sexual harassment is shaped by both victimisation and gender socialisation. First, women more often than men are the victims of sexual harassment, although men certainly can be victims as well, and experience can foster insight. Second, the way that boys and girls, men and women are socialised plays a role. For example, traditionally boys and men have been socialised away from empathy: from recognising the harms that other people may face or from being able to 'walk in their shoes'. Gender role attitudes also play a role: among men, individuals are less likely to see behaviours as sexual harassment if they have negative views towards women, a higher belief in rape myths, and a higher likelihood of being sexually coercive themselves.²

This also means that men are less likely than women to appreciate the impact on women of sexual harassment. Men are more likely than women to dismiss behaviours as just innocuous flirtation, teasing or friendly banter, whereas those behaviours may be experienced by women as intrusive, violating or degrading.

Impacts on victims and bystanders

The research finds that sexual harassment has significant work-related outcomes for victims. These include detrimental impacts on their job satisfaction, attachment and commitment to the organisation and overall productivity, as well as the likelihood that they may withdraw from work, not do certain tasks, or be late or neglectful. Sexual harassment also has psychological and health outcomes. It can cause emotional impacts (such as fear, sadness, depression and humiliation), symptoms like headaches, muscle pain, nausea and exhaustion, and PTSD.³ And, in fact, indirect exposure to



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sexual harassment – knowing that others in the organisation have been subject to sexual harassment – has some of the same impacts.

BARRIERS TO MEN'S ADVOCACY

Many men do reject sexual harassment, and some do speak up or take action when they see sexual harassment taking place. Yet many do not. There are significant barriers to men advocating to end sexual harassment.

The first barrier is the one mentioned above: lower levels of understanding and recognition of sexual harassment. Gender socialisation can mean that men are more likely than women to grow up thinking that it's normal to joke about women's bodies or competencies, continue to persist in expressing sexual interest when someone seems reluctant, and tease (other) men about being feminine.⁴

A second barrier is the sense that sexual harassment is a 'women's issue'. When they encounter the issue of sexual harassment, some men ask, 'What's it got to do with me? I don't sexually harass women. This isn't my problem.' A useful response would be:

'That's great. It's great that you don't sexually harass women, that you uphold that as a personal value. At the same time, it's likely that there is sexual harassment going on around you, in the workplaces that you're involved in, and among people you know. In fact, it's entirely possible that men you know, and perhaps some women, are behaving in harassing ways in the workplace. And you, as someone who doesn't perpetrate sexual harassment, have a really key role to play in doing something about it. If you don't speak up, if you don't intervene in the behaviours and the cultures that feed into harassment, then you are leaving the problem untouched.'

Some men respond with defensiveness and hostility to efforts addressing violence and sexual harassment. This is the third barrier: that when such efforts are made, men may feel they are being unfairly tarnished as perpetrators, or that these efforts are anti-male. Some indignantly refer to women's perpetration of violence against men, although anti-violence

efforts routinely acknowledge both female perpetration and male victimisation.⁵

A fourth barrier is that men often overestimate other men's comfort with harassment, as various studies have documented.⁶ Imagine a situation where six men are sitting around having a drink after work, and one makes sleazy or sexist comments about a woman at work. Probably four of the other men among those six do not think that that behaviour is okay, but none speak up. Every single one of those individual men assumes, mistakenly, that they are the only one who considers that behaviour unacceptable. The man who has made the sleazy comment thinks it's fine, because no one criticises him. And perhaps one other person in that group might agree with that behaviour, and so those two think they are in the majority. Meanwhile, the four men who are actually the majority, who do not agree with that behaviour, remain silent, and all overestimate other men's support for that behaviour.⁷

A fifth barrier to men taking action is their fears of others' reactions to intervention. Some men stay silent because they fear criticism or loss of social status: 'What's wrong with you? What kind of man are you?' Particularly in male-dominated workplaces characterised by strong norms of male bonding and loyalty, men may be particularly concerned about 'breaking ranks'.⁸

The final barrier is lack of knowledge of or skills at intervention. Plenty of men recognise that sexist and harassing behaviour in the workplace is wrong, at least to some extent. But they will not necessarily know what to do about it: what to say, to whom they can speak, or what kind of intervention might be appropriate.

There are barriers, therefore, to recognising sexually harassing behaviour as a problem, feeling responsible for doing something about it, knowing what to do about it, and taking action once the knowledge is there. Each of these barriers must be addressed. We can lower the threshold for what is recognised as sexual harassment, foster a sense of responsibility to act, teach skills in taking action, and inspire a willingness to act.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION

Before exploring how to involve men in sexual harassment prevention, let's look briefly at prevention strategies more widely. There is consensus that strategies that are effective in preventing and reducing sexual harassment are those that are comprehensive, involving whole-of-institution efforts. These efforts include leadership commitment; policies, planning and strategies; and education and training.⁹

Educational programs are a widely used strategy for sexual harassment prevention. Although their evidence base is weak,¹⁰ they are more likely to be effective if they:

- are embedded in a whole-of-institution approach, in which their content is reinforced by policies, leadership, and other strategies;
- address the drivers of sexual harassment;
- involve effective forms of teaching and learning that are participatory, interactive, provided by skilled educators, and of sufficient duration and intensity; and
- are relevant to the target audience and their contexts.¹¹

Sexual harassment education/training is more likely to have positive, significant, and lasting impacts on knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours if it:

- is interactive and immersive;
- offers specific examples of inappropriate conduct and clear and accessible descriptions of standards of behaviour;
- clearly communicates behavioural expectations;
- teaches behavioural skills;
- is driven by a substantive concern with preventing and reducing sexual harassment rather than merely box-checking and legal compliance; and
- is supported and reinforced by management.¹²

Whole-of-institution prevention of sexual harassment requires ownership and participation by senior leadership; the provision of dedicated resources; education that is career-long and provided from the top to the bottom of the organisation; communication for culture change; victim assistance and support; and robust processes for reporting and accountability.¹³

Since men begin from a different place to women on the issue, involving men in change also requires distinct methods.

Inviting men in

Given the barriers identified earlier, many men either don't recognise the problem of sexual harassment, feel it's not their problem, or don't know what to do about it. How can men be invited in to the work of preventing and reducing sexual harassment?

There is a growing body of experience on how to engage men in playing positive roles in stopping domestic and sexual violence, offering important lessons for working on sexual harassment.¹⁴

One key strategy is to personalise the issue. Men will listen more readily to concerns about sexual harassment if this is done.¹⁵ We can appeal to men's care and concern for the women and girls in their own lives, the women whom they know and about whom they care. We can use women's stories, given the evidence that hearing women's experiences of violence is a significant source of men's sensitisation to the issue. Men's concerns about harms to women can be paternalistic and even patriarchal, and it is important to move men past this to a fundamental care and respect for the rights, autonomy and bodily integrity of all women and girls.

Appealing to higher values and principles is a second strategy. Most people in organisations, including men in senior leadership, have a basic agreement with the idea of a fair go, equality and fairness. And if we look at the senior men in workplaces who have become advocates for gender equality, one pathway to advocacy is, precisely, via their sense of principle and their values.¹⁶

A third strategy is emphasising that men will benefit from the progress made with addressing sexual harassment and building gender equality. Some men's resistance to gender initiatives stems from the idea that gender equality is a zero-sum game – that as women gain greater equality men will lose. It is valuable to emphasise instead that gender equality is 'win-win'. For example, men and women alike

benefit from more inclusive workplaces and a more diverse pool of talent.

One way of advancing this idea is by presenting the 'business case': the case that reducing sexual harassment and building more respectful workplaces is good for the economic bottom line, in terms of higher productivity, lower levels of absenteeism and job detachment, and so on. But we should also highlight that men will benefit on a more personal level. Men gain when gender roles and norms are more flexible and diverse; this allows them, for example, to take time off to parent, and frees them from the expectation that as men they must always be tough, stoic, and hyper-competitive. Men also gain when they have more trusting and respectful relations with women, whether in workplaces or elsewhere.¹⁷

In seeking to reach men, we must start with men wherever they are. We must use language which is meaningful to men, speaks to men's experiences, and addresses their concerns. In practice, this may mean tailoring conversations to men's particular circumstances and experiences. It may mean drawing on relevant messengers and role models, individuals who appeal to, are respected by, or are reflective of, the men they are speaking to.

A fifth strategy is to begin with the positive and build on men's strengths. This can mean beginning by emphasising that most men treat women and girls with respect and do not harass them. Efforts engaging men should seek to build on men's existing commitments to and involvements in non-violence and respect, particularly to minimise men's defensiveness and disengagement.¹⁸ At the same time, our work must continue to centre on a robust critique of sexual harassment. And we should not assume that no one in the room has perpetrated harassment or has the propensity to do so.

Showing that other men agree is a sixth strategy. As noted earlier, men's engagement in sexual harassment prevention is often stymied by their overestimation of other men's comfort with violence and unwillingness to intervene.¹⁹ So it is valuable, for example, to gather and disseminate actual data on the extent of other men's agreement, as 'social norms' campaigns do, and to leverage the influence of powerful figures.

If we want men to support sexual harassment prevention and gender equality initiatives, we must also provide concrete opportunities and invitations for their involvement. One key means of doing so is using men's informal networks, and 'tapping them on the shoulder' to come along to an event or join a group. Another is to organise trainings, workshops and conversation groups where sexual harassment is part of a wider discussion about topics which may be appealing to men, such as sex, health, dating, communication or masculinity.

Finally, men, like women, need knowledge of and skills at intervention. Men need to know what to do and say when a workmate is commenting that women do not belong in leadership positions, or telling some sleazy story, or keeps asking someone on a date when it's very clear that they are not interested.²⁰

HOW MEN CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

What can men do, then, to contribute to preventing and reducing sexual harassment? Of course women have vital roles to play too, but given that fewer men have taken up this work so far, let's focus on men.

The first thing any man can do is to start with himself: to put his own house in order. Men can ask themselves: do I consistently treat the women (and men) at work with respect? Are there ways that my behaviour might contribute to harassment or sexism or unfair inequalities, whether or not I intend it to?

Men can build respectful and inclusive relations with women at work, and elsewhere too: at home, on the street, in the pub.²¹ That may require men to learn more about the pervasive realities of sexual harassment, and become more critical of the everyday ways that sexist and harassing behaviour is normalised or excused in our culture.

But, as well as working on their own lives and relationships, men can start to speak up and take action. Often individuals may be bystanders, observing or being aware of sexual harassment and harassment-supportive behaviours and incidents.²² These individuals then have a choice: to be passive, taking no action; or to be active, taking action to prevent or reduce harm.

Men can become active and involved bystanders by:

- supporting victims and survivors of harassment and abuse;
- challenging perpetrators and potential perpetrators and holding them to account; and
- intervening in harassing behaviour.²³

This does not mean charging in, guns blazing, like some kind of vengeful hero, but it does mean assertively speaking up, voicing dissent or discomfort, or taking other appropriate action. Men can also act as positive role models, whether as colleagues, or in their roles as parents, coaches, and so on.

The leaders of workplaces and organisations often are men, and senior men have an important role to play as 'champions' for gender equality.²⁴ Senior management's leadership and ownership of the issue are vital in setting a standard, assembling resources, providing mentorship, providing vision and guidance, and setting expectations regarding accountability.

Still, there are some cautions. Male 'champions' aren't enough by themselves; organisational and structural strategies are vital too. We have to make sure that the principle of gender equality isn't just something individual leaders can either endorse or ignore, but is actually built into our very definitions of leadership, and into organisational values. Male senior leaders are more likely to be credible agents of change if they show consistent, genuine support for gender equality initiatives, their support is visible and ongoing, and they 'walk the walk'.²⁵

CONCLUSION

Significant progress towards ending sexual harassment is unlikely without widespread shifts in men's attitudes and behaviours. Media and community attention to #MeToo and other advocacy has prompted some positive shifts among men,²⁶ and small numbers of men have become advocates for

workplace equality. But it is time for far more systematic efforts to involve men, alongside women, in building safe and respectful workplaces and communities. ■

Notes: **1** A Pina and T A Gannon, 'An overview of the literature on antecedents, perceptions and behavioural consequences of sexual harassment', *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2012, 209–32. **2** Ibid. See also A M O'Leary-Kelly, L Bowes-Sperry, C A Bates and E R Lean, 'Sexual Harassment at Work: A Decade (Plus) of Progress', *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2009, 503–36. **3** Pina and Gannon, above note 1. **4** A Maass, M Cadinu and S Galdi, 'Sexual harassment: Motivations and consequences' in MK Ryan and NR Branscombe (eds), *The Sage handbook of gender and psychology*, Sage, 2013, 341–58. **5** M Flood, *Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. **6** Ibid. **7** A D Berkowitz, K W Bogen, R Lopez, MM Mulla and LM Orchowski, 'The social norms approach as a strategy to prevent violence perpetrated by men and boys: A review of the literature' in LM Orchowski and A Berkowitz (eds), *Engaging Boys and Men in Sexual Assault Prevention: Theory, Research and Practice*, Elsevier, 2021, 149–82. **8** Flood, above note 5. **9** H Campbell and S Chinnery, *What works? Preventing & Responding to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*, CARE Australia, Canberra, 2018. **10** VJ Magley, LF Fitzgerald, J Salisbury, F Drasgow and MJ Zickar, 'Changing sexual harassment within organizations via training interventions: Suggestions and empirical data' in R J Burke (ed), *The fulfilling workplace: The organization's role in achieving individual and organizational health*, Routledge, 2013, 225–46; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*, National Academies Press, Washington, DC, 2018. **11** M Flood, L Fergus and M Heenan, *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian secondary schools*, Report, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Vic), 2009 <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/103414/1/_qut.edu.au_Documents_StaffHome_staffgroupB%24_bozzetto_Documents_2017000497.pdf>. **12** Magley et al, above note 10; MV Roehling and J Huang, 'Sexual harassment training effectiveness: An interdisciplinary review and call for research', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2018, 134–50; ZT Kalinoski, D Steele-Johnson, EJ Peyton, KA Leas, J Steinke and NA Bowling, 'A meta-analytic evaluation of diversity training outcomes', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 34, No. 8, 2013, 1076–104. **13** Flood, above note 5. **14** Ibid. **15** Flood, above note 5. **16** M Flood and G Russell, *Men Make a Difference: Engaging Men on Gender Equality*, Report, Diversity Council of Australia, Sydney, 2017 <<https://xyonline.net/sites/xyonline.net/files/2020-05/DCA%2C%20Men%20Make%20a%20Difference%20-%20Full%20report.pdf>>. **17** M Flood, 'Men and Gender Equality' in *Engaging Men in Building Gender Equality*, M Flood (ed) with R Howson, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015, 1–31. **18** Flood, above note 5. **19** Berkowitz et al, above note 7. **20** M Flood, 'Men Speak Up: A toolkit for action in men's daily lives', Report, White Ribbon Foundation, Sydney, 2011 <<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/awcontent/whiteribbon/documents/White-Ribbon-Australia-Men-Speak-Up.pdf>>. **21** Ibid. **22** P McDonald and M Flood, *Encourage. Support. Act!: Bystander Approaches to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*, Report, Australian Human Rights Commission, Sydney, 2012. **23** Flood, above note 20. **24** Flood and Russell, above note 12. **25** Ibid. **26** M Flood, 'Men and #MeToo: Mapping Men's Responses to Anti-violence Advocacy' in B Fileborn and R Loney-Howes (eds), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 285–300.

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